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ABSTRACT

White children of the rural South are caught between two cultures--the middle class value system taught at school and the rural lower/working class values held by their parents. Differences in values and the attitudes of parents present an impediment to the children's education as well as to the successful implementation of health, education, and welfare programs. Wary of outsiders, the parents resist programs designed to "help". Differences in personal priorities, lifestyle, and acceptable standards of living result in their insistance on continuing a standard of living they deem adequate and sometimes good. Little research has been done on this subpopulation; when introducing new programs change agents have little information to aid them in understanding the culture. They need to know more about how the people will receive a program, what impact information and education will have, what alternative tactics might be used, and how utilization could be increased. In-depth research of a descriptive, ethnographic nature is called for before improvements can be realized; it will pave the way for greatly needed help in overcoming the extreme deficiencies in the rural South where great numbers of the poor and disadvantaged are to be found. (Author/DS)

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THE IMPACT OF THE RURAL SOUTHERN CULTURE OF WHITE PARENTS ON THE HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE OF THEIR CHILDREN

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I. Introduction

The health, education, and welfare problems are greatest and the deficits largest for the lower class socioeconomically; for the rural population demographically; and for Southerners regionally. Triply disadvantaged, then, are the lower-class rural Southern children. In the Deep South particularly, this segment of the national population is almost exclusively composed of blacks and of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Although there is an abundance of studies about blacks in all settings, there has been very little research on this white subpopulation in spite of their desperate needs and virtually no research on the possibility that the conflict between their cultural values and attitudes and those of the various institutions is the major impediment to the education of their children as well as to the hygiene, health, and nutrition facets of their welfare.

This paper, then, addresses the problems of this particular segment of the population: the white children in the rural South.

II. The Mismatch of the Culture of the Home and the Culture of the Institutions

When change agents begin the implementation of their programs--whether in the areas of health, education, or welfare--there is an inherent impediment to reaching their goals: the differences in cultural values and attitudes of parents toward the health, education, and welfare of their children. Since the schools are a focal dissemination point for academic education as well as for education in nutrition, hygiene, health, etc., some of the difficulties stemming from the educational problems of the poor which Tyack summarizes as "The mismatch of the culture of the school

and the culture of the community" (1976:282) will be presented here.

This problem arises when those in charge of educating the children are from one group whose culture and values concerning education are at variance with the culture and values of the ones to be educated who are from another or other groups.

"Educators who work with parents and children from the culture of poverty are often confronted with problems associated with the value system of the parents, the attitudes of parents associated with these values, the value systems of schools and the success of the children within these value systems. In recent years educators first attempted to work with low-income parents and children on the assumption that the children had deficits that needed to be remediated and, thus, all efforts were directed toward eliminating or reducing deficits. In reaction to this philosophy, some of the parents from the culture of poverty began to resist these efforts and the insinuations that something was wrong with their children and value systems. . . . Differences in the development of the intellectual functioning of children have been found not only associated with socioeconomic status but also with the culture of the parents" (Karnes and Zehrback 1975:44, 45).

In the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth we find the impact of attempts to "Americanize" all who did not adhere to mainstream WASP America. Educating the children by educating the family was advocated (Tyack 1975:231) and was not too different a stance from today's new "solution." Immigrants were expected to shed their culture. There were demands for Anglo-Saxon conformity, total assimilation. "As substitute parents, the social workers were to save the slum child from

the 'degeneracy,' ignorance, poverty, and foreign habits of the unAmerican home" (Wishy 1968:135). "Even under the best of conditions Americanization of the children tended to produce strain between parents and children in the home" (Tyack 1975:241). There was a fear of losing their children to Americanization and oftentimes there was a disintegration of home life as it had been known. The child became American; the family remained foreign (Tyack 1975).

The "Americanization" process of former centuries simply has another terminology now: making everyone middle-class, Middle American. Imposing middle-class, Middle American values on "alien" cultures is not limited to ethnic minorities. The thrust is upon the entire lower-class population which includes those whose "alien" ethnic backgrounds are difficult to trace. White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock abounds within lower-class urban and rural schools. But no one gives the children from this subpopulation any special attention or their problems any special recognition.

Whereas yesterday's immigrant child became American while the family remained foreign through "Americanization," today's lower-class urban or rural WASP child is pressured to become middle class while the family remains lower-class. In both instances when this shift does occur, animosity, alienation, and loss of the culture of origin become the price in many cases. When we, the educators, the change-agents, the social workers, move into these rural areas with our health, welfare, and education help-programs, we are indeed urging the replacement of rural lower/working-class values for our middle-class values.

More difficult than such a transition for the urban child is the transition for <u>the rural child</u>--there are not only class culture to shed and values

to be exchanged but also the special transition from rural culture and values to those that are urban. Even more difficult is the transition for the rural Southern child when there is yet another dimension, the special culture of the rural South and the educational and occupational handicaps associated with the economics of the region (Blau and Duncan 1967:213-319).

III. Educational Problems of White Children in the Rural South

In the foreword to the latest--and probably most definitive--assessment of rural education, Robert Coles says (Sher 1977:xv): "Even as rural children who come to the city get overlooked, misinterpreted, and insulted by various 'authorities' all too sure of themselves, boys and girls in the rural sections of this country have been outrageously victimized by condescension, aloofness, and yes, the ignorance of arrogant bureaucracies."

The problems of inner-city/ghetto populations and even of upper-middle-class suburbia are highly publicized in books, periodicals, and studies. But until very recently there was little reference in the literature to the plight of the children of lower-class rural America as a whole.

It is, however, well established that educational facilities, offerings, and outcomes in rural areas are inadequate or at least below the national norms. "All groups of disadvantaged rural students are characterized by poor educational achievement" (Edington 1970:75). In the Digest of Educational Statistics (1976) in tables

showing educational progress by age and size and type of community, the extreme rural participants are in all age groups and in all subject areas behind every other category except the extreme inner-city groups.

"By its very nature, the typical rural community offers few options in terms of either employment or social activities. The paucity of alternatives affects all that people do, think, and plan for. Studies have concluded that a low level of occupational aspirations among rural youth is associated with the dearth of impressions and lack of visible alternatives in the rural community" (The 1967 President's National Advisory Commission on rural Poverty Report, p. 43). Bloom et al. (1965) assert that children from poor families get little help at home in learning to read or write or speak, do not know what parental stimulation is, and rarely find their parents interested in how well they do.

Included in the issue of Review of Educational Research specially subtitled "Education for Socially Disadvantaged Children" is an article on disadvantaged rural youth (Edington, 1970). The piece begins with the following:

> Previous research reviews have tended to overlook the rural student and the characteristics which may be unique to him and his situation. . . . During the last few years, a considerable amount of material was written about rural Americans, but little of it was based upon research. Although adequate research design is lacking in many of the studies, they do tend to give the best

> picture available of the rural student. Much of the material cited in this article is not available in published journals; it came from fugitive documents of limited circulation . . . available through the ERIC system . . . . Since they tend to be removed from the proximity of major research centers, this population has not been the subject of intensive longitudinal and development process investigation (p. 69).

In the above review of the research, most of the material and the cited references center on the following special populations of rural American youth: "Mexican-Americans" and those from other Spanish-surname families," the "Southern rural Negroes," and the "American Indians." Studies concerning rural whites versus blacks, farm versus nonfarm boys, and Indian versus Anglo youth are cited. Except for the "mountain folks of Appalachia," certainly a small part of the rural population, there is in this review about rural American youth and "major cultures represented by disadvantaged rural youth" nothing about what must be considered the neglected majority and oldest, non-native population of rural America: the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant element.

A. Educating the WASP Element of Rural America

Immigration over the years has produced in rural areas ethnic enclaves such as those of Scandinavian and German heritage. Scattered throughout rural regions are populations like the Indians, Chicanos, and migrant workers of mixed origin. In considering rural America as a whole and through time, however, one usually thinks of the backbone of rural America as Anglo-Saxon, white, and Protestant. During the years since Edington's article reviewing the literature on disadvantaged rural youth was published, there

has still been virtual silence on the subject of the rural WASP element and the inherent problems with this special culture (Current Index to Journals in Education 1977), with the exception of books like Sher's (1977) that includes case studies on rural populations that are primarily WASP but are not highlighted as such). In a bibliography of abstracts of articles on rural sociology covering seventy years (up to 1972), there are only about fifty entries for education and of these only a very few that pertain to educating rural WASP America (Bertrand, 1972).

B. Education in the South

Narrowing further to the Southeast as a whole--urban and rural--statistics show the educational plight of the children in this region. In the aforementioned Digest of Educational Statistics, Tables 179-184 compare by region educational progress in writing, reading, science, literature, citizenship, and music. The participants from the Southeast have the lowest scores in all areas and in all age groups with the exception of writing in the earliest age group. However, in all age groups for all areas the Southeast participants have the greatest median differences (all negative) of group performance from the national performance over all items.

In Table 18 showing the percent of draftees who fail to meet the mental requirements for induction into the armed forces by state, Alabama has the highest percentage (28.6%). All entries over 10% are for states in the South or regionally debatable borderline states. All Southeastern Deep South states are over 20%. The national figure is 9.9%.

In the illiteracy table (17) for the population 14 years old and over, the same pattern prevails, Hawaii and Rhode Island being the only exception

to the fact that the Southern states have the highest percentage of illiterates. Also Tables 6, 15, and 16 showing percent of the population 3 to 34 years old enrolled in school by age and by state; years of school completed by persons 25 years old and over by state; and median school years completed by persons 25 years old and over by state respectively reveal the same differences between Southern participants and those of the non-Southern states.

Coupling rural educational problems with those of the Southeast, the children of the rural Southeast are indeed educationally disadvantaged.

In focusing on the educational problems of low-income rural Southerners, we have a concentration of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant element which is rarely researched. Most of this population can trace back several generations of simply being Protestant Southerners. In the past, of course, there were other ethnic elements; but by now these have been so watered down that hardly anyone refers to such origins except in terms of distant ancestors. There is, in fact, little or no intermarrying with non-Southerners, unlike the urban/suburban areas in the South. But the rural areas cling to many of the traditions and elements that began to disappear during the last two generations in nonrural areas (Dillman, 1976a). It is fairly well known that Catholicism does not abound in the South, and in the rural areas one can be hard pressed to know where the nearest Catholic church is.

The few studies that do deal with the rural WASP population usually focus on Appalachia. The rural South and Appalachia are not synonymous. In the first place, Appalachia reaches into the northern states; secondly, Appalachia in the South includes only a small portion of a few Southern states. Although most of Appalachis <u>is</u> rural, the culture in the Appala-

chian areas of these states is different from the culture of the rural South as a whole. The rural South does indeed include some of Appalachia but most of the area classified as rural in the South is not in Appalachia.

There are some similarities between Appalachians and rural Southerners, and some of the two geographic areas do overlap. But studies about Appalachia cannot be used for generalizations about rural Southerners nor are they adequate substitutes for research on the culture of rural Southerners. "Children should never know more than their parents" and "What was good enough for me and my folks is good enough for my children" are statements that have reflected the cultural attitudes and values inherent in socialization in much of rural America. Although the current generation's parents have relaxed some of these stringent traditional values, such values are far from dead, particularly in the rural South.

IV. Health and Welfare Problems of the Children in the Rural South

Feldman (1966) shows that there is a strong positive association between level of education and level of health-care knowledge. Inherent in this problem is the fact that even though exposed to information, many ignore it. Then there are those who, because of lack of education or intelligence, cannot understand the information. Others forget or reject the information completely for various reasons.

Ethnographic fieldwork by the author has shown that cultural values interfere greatly with successful dissemination and utilization of health and welfare information. Consider, for instance, dental work. Teaching children the necessity of early detection and treatment of dental problems at school or through the media will be of no avail if the cultural attitudes in the home are at variance with this concept. The usual pattern in lower-

income groups--urban and rural, but particularly rural--is to pull teeth when the pain is great enough and to pull the remainder and buy false teeth when there are not enough teeth remaining for effective chewing. Even if the methods for saving teeth--crowns, root canals, bridgework--were explained, in general these people would rather invest the money perhaps in a large-screen television set or a late-model car. If they prefer such items to indoor plumbing, for instance--and they do in many cases--dental work would probably be much further down the priority list.

In a table showing knowledge of certain disease symptoms by characteristics including those of occupation, income, demographic locale, and region, those with the lowest scores were (1) those who were blue-collar workers and farmers; (2) those with the lowest income; (3) those living in rural counties; and (4) those living in the South (Feldman 1966:105).

The special culture of the average rural Southerner includes the values of rural America in general, of the WASP/lower/working class in general, and of the South in particular. Usually these subgroup values individually thwart implementation of health/education/welfare programs and thus when combined present a formidable impediment. A constant factor throughout the characteristic mosaic of rural America is a general resistance to cultural assimilation into mainstream middle-class, Middle America and in a majority of cases to integration racially, ethnically, religiously, regionally, and even demographically. History has taught all groups and subgroups to be wary of "outsiders." This is reflected even today in rural areas in their distrust of government officials and anything that smacks of "city" rather than "country." Inherent in such values are (1) a distrust of and (2) resistance to health, welfare, and educational programs designed to "help."

Offers--and particularly pressures--to help say to rural people, "Your cultural ways are wrong; ours are right."

Statistics on lower/working class groups do not take into consideration the differences in personal priorities, lifestyle, and acceptable standards of living that enable many to maintain a quality of life that they perceive as at least adequate and in many cases good. Reliance on a privy for toilet facilities, for instance, is not necessarily indicative of poverty--a late-model car may be preferred to indoor plumbing.

Although most of rural America can be derined socioeconomically as working/lower class, very little attention is given to the fact that there are many socioeconomic differences and divisions within that class. Being on welfare is considered a contemptible disgrace by many rural people. Some of the rural population that is classified low income and/or lower class are not impoverished, underfed, and financially deprived. They feel that they have a good life and that improvement through government help-agents and/or educators is not necessary and in fact consider such efforts to be intrusions.

Southern culture in its purest form is expressed almost universally in the rural areas of the South where assimilation into mainstream America is slow if it exists at all. Values include complete deference to parents and other older relatives in a vast kinship network. Even disobedient somewhat deviant children who only pay lip-service to such deference accept the larger values that are embedded in their socialization process. Attitudes toward outsiders, help-agents, and education are transmitted to

the children probably more intact than are most values--and most rural white Southerners, with their working-class, WASP background, have negative attitudes in these areas (Dillman 1976b).

It is difficult to combat with any success the acculturation of the children through the educational processes even when the end result would mean better health for the children.

VII. Seeking a Solution to the Impeding Cultural Gap

Years ago, one of the first slum clearance projects included moving poor people into new housing facilities. It is remembered now for a not-so-funny joke. The families promptly put the bathtubs to use as coal bins.

For the sake of an analogy, let's assume that, if the families had been instructed about the use of bathtubs, some would have accepted this information at face value and used them for their intended purpose. The rest rejected this use as being unnecessary. Further information about sanitation, hygiene, health, etc., convinced some of this latter group to change their minds and use the bathtubs for bathing. But some, regardless of instructional information and predictions of health hazards in uncleanliness, would not use the bathtubs for baths because of imbedded socialization and conditioning against new "contraptions" and what they considered waste of time, water, etc.

Moving on from this oversimplification of a small matter to major health and education problems, it can be seen that the solutions do not lie in simply more "education," more information, more dissemination from the "top"--the officials and authorities. It is imperative to start at the "bottom"--in the home, with the families.

The "top" must know ahead of time how the "bottom" will receive "the

bathtubs"--how bathtubs fit the culture, what the culture is, what impact education and information will have and to how many, what alternate tactics could be used, how to increase utilization, etc. One way to begin such a monumental task is through an ethnographic approach utilizing qualitative methodology.

For instance, in the area of academic education, such research would include finding out from community and family participant-observation what measures could be taken that might develop rapport between school and family and thus create a positive atmosphere conducive to educational interest, effort, and achievement for the children.

In the health area, considering dental work for instance, such research could determine the specific attitudes of families toward prevention and treatment and could find out if community dentists are knowledgeable in the latest dentistry techniques but do not use them because of the culture of the community.

In other words, until such baseline studies are accomplished, programs from the top down will simply be ineffective and wasteful.

Research at the family level must be undertaken and the culture of the community understood and taken into account before any strategies are developed and implemented. Admittedly, this is a difficult, time-consuming task that will require in-depth research utilizing case-study, ethnographic research techniques. Inherent in such research are two problems.

First, getting researchers into rural areas and having them accepted is difficult and requires time--and hence, money. Hicks writes that it took six months before his position in the Appalachian community he was studying became established. He was thought at various times to be an "FBI man," a psychiatrist, a tourist, a teacher--all negative connotations

of being a "furriner" (Hicks 1976).

Second, finding researchers with an appropriate background for such work and the necessary inclination is not easy. A native who has gone urban/professional may not have the required detachment for anthropological work in his/her place of origin. On the other hand, professional credentials do not guarantee a range of personal exposure to and involvement with the population under study, a background needed for some commonality necessary for acceptance and trust by the community and/or for an attitude that is at least neutral if not empathetically interested.

Though difficult, it is not an impossible task. It is imperative to have this basic researched foundation of knowledge to promote understanding among school authorities, help-agents, and researchers that will help in formulating successful strategies to improve the health, welfare, and education of the chidren in the rural South.

VII. Summary

Through in-depth research of a descriptive, ethnographic nature, much can be learned about the cultural impact of Southern rural white parents on their children's health, education, and welfare. This is an imperative necessity before improvement in these areas can be successfully implemented for this group. Such first-step basic research will pave the way for greatly needed help in overcoming the extreme deficiencies in the rural South where great numbers of the poor and disadvantaged are to be found.

The focus of most research and implementation has been in urban/suburban settings and among large ethnic populations such as blacks and Mexican-Americans. Very little activity in research areas has been directed to the white rural population, particularly in the South where

there is such a concentration of the lower-class WASP element. The special culture within this population is rarely ever considered as an underlying problem to implementation of solutions to meet their needs and those of their children.

Help-agents and researchers are all too often unaware of such differences in cultural values and attitudes between themselves and the families in the communities and areas they serve and study, even though they are of course knowledgeable about class differences. By bringing the problems to the attention of educators, policymakers, researchers, social workers, etc., it is hoped that a better understanding of these people will help in dealing in a constructive manner with the education, health, and welfare of the children.

Then there is always the remaining ethical problem of "disturbing the culture." Perhaps there is a middle-of-the-road approach that will benefit the children without destroying the family ties that are bound by the culture.

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